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ABSTRACT

A workshop was conducted to give participants an opportunity to explore how to apply a different paradigm for learning in organizations. The workshop agenda was as follows: presentation of the theory and supporting research; experiential activities to apply the paradigm in academic and organizational settings; small group discussion aimed at developing a model for increasing learning capacity; and large group synthesis and a closure activity during which participants were asked to volunteer to help write a paper on the model developed. A paradigm consisting of the following elements was presented: learning based on minimal competence to learning based on continual improvement; learning based on fear of failure to learning based on team risk-taking and creativity; learning based on individual performance to learning based on team and collective performance; learning based on autonomy and competition to learning based on cooperation and relationships; learning based on appraisal and criticism to learning based on coaching, support, and feedback; formal learning to informal learning; learning based on one right answer to learning based on multiple answers; learning based on abstract, logical reasoning to learning based on intuition and context; and learning based on outcome to learning based on process. (MN)

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Increasing Capacity to Learn in the Learning Organization

By Neal E. Chalofsky

Innovative Session 4

[AHRD Conference, 2001]

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Increasing Capacity to Learn in the Learning Organization

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If HRD is a field of study and practice responsible for fostering long-term, work-related learning capacity, then we need to identify the learning actions that would actually help people increase their capacity to learn in order to transform themselves and their organizations. This innovative session is about exploring this question and developing a model for increasing learning capacity.

Keywords: Learning Capacity, Adult Learning, Learning Process

The purpose of this innovative session is to conduct an experiential workshop on how to increase learning capacity. This session is applicable for both faculty and practitioners who are interested in assisting others to achieve more meaningful learning experiences. This session is designed to involve the participants in an exploration and discussion about how to apply a different paradigm for learning. (This session is based on a graduate course I have conducted for the past five years both on- and off-campus, as well as internationally.)

Agenda/Format

- Presentation of the theory and supporting research (30 minutes)
- Experiential activities that can be used to apply the paradigm in both academic and organizational settings. (20 minutes)
- Small group discussion that would attempt to develop a model for increasing learning capacity (20 minutes)
- Large group synthesis and closure (participants would be asked to volunteer to help write a paper on the model that is developed (20 minutes)

Theoretical Discussion

There is a widespread belief that adult learning is one of, if not the primary theoretical basis of HRD. Those practitioners and researchers that advocate this perspective focus on individual and organizational change through learning and see HRD as "the field of study and practice responsible for fostering long-term, work-related learning capacity at the individual, group and organizational levels in organizations" (Watkins, 1989, p. 427). HRD is thus primarily concerned with "increasing the learning capacity of individuals, groups, collectives and organizations through the development and application of learning-based interventions for purpose of optimizing human and organizational growth and effectiveness" (Chalofsky, 1992, p. 179). Unfortunately, adult workplace learning still operates predominantly on a mechanistic, behavioristic paradigm for learning (Marsick ,1987; Chalofsky, 1996). Yet, it is not surprising, since most organizations are still structured and function bureaucratically.

The Weberian concept of bureaucracy is based on the same mechanistic paradigm. Organizations need to have clear, hierarchical lines of authority, jobs that do not overlap, and management through rational systems of delegation and control. Carr and Kemmis (in Marsick, 1987) talked about the dominant paradigm in the field of teaching and learning to be related to the Weberian ideal based on logical positivism. Practitioners under this paradigm are expected to master and apply an objective body of knowledge that had been developed over time through theory building and testing.

Another view of this paradigm was offered by Senge (1990) when he stated that "we are conditioned to see life as a series of events, and for every event, we think there is one obvious cause" (p. 21).

At this point in time most of us have heard about Peter Vaill's "permanent white water" metaphor, the implications of the "new sciences", and the new employment contract & new economy. The significance of all of the above is that not only is the rate and severity of change increasing, but also the nature of change is changing. Given the state of change and complexity in work (as well as in society in general)" . . . in complex systems

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possibilities can be known but precise *outcomes* cannot be predicted" (Nicoll, D, 1984, p.10). This means that there are not only multiple ways of knowing; of viewing reality, but, as Billy Joel stated in one of his songs, "the more I learn, the less that I know". We need to accept that logical, linear, one right answer thinking is not helpful any more. We need to accept divergence, multiple perspectives, and incomplete truths. In giving up the search for universal truth, we need to give up the notion that reality is based on fact. Reality is socially constructed and phenomenally based. Knowing, then, requires engagement and an acceptance that it is an interpretive, dynamic act. To learn, we continually need to be open to all possibilities; the Zen phrase, "a beginner's mind", captures the essence of this.

There are alternative approaches to learning (e. g. Jean Houston's work on increasing brain functioning and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences) and research that supports specific learning techniques that can be considered "alternative" (e.g. visualization or intuition), but little has been done to attempt to pull together a new approach to increasing learning capacity.

There is a critical need to identify and promote a counter-balancing paradigm for learning in organizations that helps organizations move through this transformation. This paradigm could draw from sources that have not been considered relevant in the past, such sources as women's ways of knowing, eastern philosophical thinking on learning, mind/body connections, and autonomous, informal learning. Such a paradigm consisting of the following elements has already been articulated (Chalofsky, 1996):

- learning based on minimal competence to learning based on *continual improvement*
- learning based on fear of failure to learning based on *risk-taking and creativity*
- learning based on individual performance to learning based on *team and collective performance*
- learning based on autonomy and competition to learning based on *cooperation and relationships*
- learning based on appraisal and criticism to learning based on *coaching, support, and feedback*
- formal learning to *informal* learning
- learning based on one right answer to learning based on *multiple answers*
- learning based on abstract, logical reasoning to learning based on *intuition and context*
- learning based on outcome (the destination) to learning based on *process (the journey)*

What we need to do next is to explicate the learning actions that would actually help people transform to this new paradigm. This session is about exploring this question and developing a model for increasing learning capacity.

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